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Author(s): Morris Roberts

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## HENRY JAMES AND THE ART OF FORESHORTENING

By MORRIS ROBERTS

Henry James's prefaces describe an art of economy, which gives the sense without the body of experience and is the economy of poetry and drama. The late novels are full of both, and it is in part the reason why they are difficult. One sees the process at work in James's revisions, which he describes as the brightening of a faded surface and the bringing of the old matter to life. How this animation is attempted appears in the following passage from *The American* (Chap. xi):

Her reflexions, at any rate, were disturbed by the advent of Newman and his companion. She glanced at them quickly, and then, colouring a little rose and stood beside her easel.

which becomes in the definitive edition:

Her reflexions, at any rate, were disturbed by the advent of her unannounced visitors, whom, as she rose and stood beside her easel, she greeted with a precipitation of eye and lip that was like the glad clap of a pair of hands.

If we compare this with a sentence from *What Maisie Knew* (Chap. xx) where the same intention is carried out much more thoroughly, we shall see why James is hard reading. Maisie comes home in a cab very late at night, clutching the money pressed into her hand by her father's mistress, for cab-fare, at the moment of parting; and is met in the hall by the maid.

The money was far too much even for a fee in a fairy-tale, and in the absence of Mrs. Beale, who, though the hour was now late, had not yet returned to the Regent's Park, Susan Ash, in the hall, as loud as Maisie was low, and as bold as she was bland, produced, on the exhibition offered under the dim vigil of the lamp that made the place a contrast to the child's recent scene of light, the half-crown that an unsophisticated cabman could pronounce to be the least he would take.

In both these sentences, though of course much more fully in the second, a small incident is animated or 'dramatized', that is, not merely recorded but shown as happening, without being expanded into a scene and dialogue. Yet all the elements of a scene are present in this closely packed sentence: place, sound, and movement, the three figures in the dimly lighted hall, the thought in Maisie's mind, the vigorous ill-humour of the

maid, awakened at that time of night, the comedy of the unsophisticated cabman. The effort in both passages, in the first chiefly by means of the simile, is to create movement, an impression of talk, and a centre of interest; in some sort the equivalent of drama.

This is the effort in James's late novels, where imagination is always at work, the moment always present and full, the story completely 'told'. It is governed by the 'law of entire expression', which creates more trouble for the reader than the subtlety of the matter. As a play is all action in the sense that all of it is acted out, without the author's intervention, so James's narrative is continuous, and is never interrupted by the mere statement that something has happened. The story may be very quiet and undramatic, but it is always fully 'dramatized'. Two things follow from this: there are no decorative or moralizing digressions in James, and there is always a necessity of 'foreshortening', of giving the sense of present action without an elaborated scene. The persistent imagery of the late stories is therefore never idle picture-making; the image casts a long shadow; it gathers up and concentrates; it may cut across the action of months and distil the essence of many pages of circumstantial detail, for it speaks straight to the imagination, like poetry; and at its best James's prose has the intensity, the deep intimations and the finality of poetry. It can be read again and again. Yet his care for verisimilitude is essentially the same as the realistic novelist's, and the imaginative splendour of his late stories is not the same thing as allegory or fable.

Thus James's image may express in a dozen words the whole sense of an occasion, without narrative or description or dialogue, as when the doctor in *The Wings of the Dove* receives Milly for the first time, having only ten minutes to give her, 'ten mere minutes which he yet placed at her service in a manner that she admired still more than she could meet it: so crystal-clean the great empty cup of attention that he set between them on the table'. The elaborate simile in *The Golden Bowl* that describes Maggie's contemplation of her husband's love-affair gathers up the experience of months; it is the 'fusion and synthesis of picture', picture being the opposite of scene or dialogue; the essential meaning of an event embodied in an unforgettable image.

This situation had been occupying for months and months the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned at the over-hanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow: looking up all the while at the fair structure that spread itself so amply

and rose so high, but never quite making out as yet where she might have entered had she wished. She hadn't wished till now—such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd besides was that though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. At present however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedentedly near. The thing might have been, by the distance at which it kept her, a Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty; there so hung about it the vision of one's putting off one's shoes to enter and even verily of one's paying with one's life if found there as an interloper. She hadn't certainly arrived at the conception of paying with her life for anything she might do; but it was nevertheless quite as if she had sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. She had knocked in short—though she could scarce have said whether for admission or for what; she had applied her hand to a cool smooth spot and had waited to see what would happen. Something *had* happened; it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within; a sound sufficiently suggesting that her approach had been noted.

Beautiful as this is it is no purple passage, but story, alive with suspense, pathos, and irony. The 'silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly' is for example not a mere decorative touch but an aspect of the Prince's affair; there is indeed no detail in the passage that is not a cue for the imagination; and if the reader at this point in the novel finds himself merely contemplating an elaborate and beautiful metaphor and waiting for something to happen the fault is not James's.

The demands of drama, that is of uninterrupted action, bring about a peculiar handling of time in the late novels. There are intentional ambiguities and discrepancies in them; there are two kinds of time, two clocks, dramatic and real, as in Shakespeare and other dramatists, but rarely if ever in the novel. In the preface to *Roderick Hudson* (written of course long after the story) James speaks of the 'eternal time-question' as being always formidable, since verisimilitude may require the effect of a long lapse of time, whereas art always demands compression. *Roderick Hudson*, for example, is implausible because the hero's deterioration seems far too sudden, and seeing this when he came to revise the story James introduced a bit of dramatic time in one passage, by substituting for the word 'year', the correct interval, the phrase 'the many revolving seasons', which suggests a good deal more than a year. In the late stories this art of deception, of 'ambiguity of appearance without ambiguity of sense', is developed to the last degree. A good example is the interval between Books II and III in *The Golden Bowl*; another is the climax of the novel (Book v),

where James, having made his usual mistake of over-preparing and leaving too little space for his climax, alludes generously to months and weeks when it is really a question of days. An impression of prolonged strain that wears Maggie out is thus produced, in spite of the fact that the period is short and the amount of action directly presented small.

James's use of dramatic time may be examined in his handling of the interval between Books II and III of *The Golden Bowl*, where the action is the love-affair of Charlotte and the Prince. When Book III opens the affair is supposed to have been going on or preparing for some time. Book II ends with Charlotte's engagement to Maggie's father. In the interval, then, between the two books Charlotte has married, spent many months of a honeymoon in America, returned to England and lived for some time in close proximity to Maggie and the Prince. During her honeymoon in America she and the prince have been separated, and so it is only after her return to England or Europe that the affair can have developed or been resumed, and it has had to develop slowly so as to lend colour to her contention that it is all a result of Maggie's prolonged neglect of her husband and of Mr. Verver's neglect of *his* partner. Besides, Maggie's realization of what is going on is slow and gradual, as may be seen from the passage quoted above. This, then, is what must have happened between Books II and III, and it is related in Book III, that is, woven into the story of the events of that book, 'pieced on', fused and synthesized; but the time in which it happened is a very elusive quantity, being sometimes two years or more, which is almost if not quite enough, and at other times only a little more than a year, which is certainly not enough. Which interval is to play its part in the illusion of the moment depends on how far James thinks he can go in sacrificing verisimilitude to liveliness. He has to achieve the sense of duration without allowing any gaps in the story to appear, to reconcile the opposing claims of verisimilitude and continuity of action. The time is elastic because it is never present time; the events that have happened in it are never directly presented. In a play such off-stage events are the subject of narrative, more or less openly; in James's novels they are the subject-matter of synthesis and fusion, as will be seen in a passage to be cited shortly. It would perhaps be more true to say that the time in which events happen off-stage is non-existent, that they happen in no time at all; and sometimes the dramatist takes pains to conceal the discrepancy, as for example in *Othello*; and sometimes he ignores verisimilitude altogether, as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act III, Scene i.

But the point is this: there is no 'eternal time-question' for the novelist unless he deliberately submits himself as far as possible to the conditions of drama, as James does in the late novels. For the novelist need not 'dramatize' his whole story. The time between Books II and III in *The*

*Golden Bowl* and the action belonging to it could have been disposed of in the first chapter of Book II, in simple narrative; and James would then have been under no necessity to make the interval seem shorter than it was: two years went by and this is what happened. Or he might have presented the story of these two years, or the more important part of it, dramatically, as present action, in an additional book. The first alternative would deprive the action of all dramatic value and would be mere reporting after the fact, the second would make the novel too long. The problem, therefore, was to make this part of the story dramatically interesting in the shortest possible space, to foreshorten, to give all the sense of it without all the substance. And in order to achieve the illusion of substance where there is only 'sense' it would be necessary to keep the reader from contemplating the empty period of two years between Books II and III; and the interval is accordingly surrounded with ambiguity and remains undefined. Further, a part of the foreshortened action, the beginning of the love affair (Book III, Chapters IV and V), has to be lifted out of its right place in the sequence of events, out of the empty interval where it belongs, and set down in the midst of a later stage in the story. And in this later stage (Books III and IV) the time indications are excessive, and in making them so the novelist's purpose was to offset the impression of huddled events and create an illusion of plausible development, without interrupting the continuous presentation or acting-out of the story, without so to speak ringing down the curtain. When, for example, at the beginning of Book IV, in the passage quoted above, Maggie thinks of her husband's love affair as having occupied the centre of her life for months and months, it is actually a matter of weeks, not months. All this is achieved without confusion and with perfect verisimilitude, the discrepancies appearing only on a painstaking analysis of the time relations in the novel.

Book III opens with the brilliant scene of the diplomatic reception at which the Prince and Charlotte appear together in public without wife or husband, and arouse the anxiety of Maggie's friend. The Prince and Charlotte are publicly paired. How has this happened? The question is answered in Chapters IV and V; first in a passage of dramatized narrative, 'picture', and then in a scene between the lovers, ending in a kiss, which appears to be the first time they have come to an open understanding. In the first passage, describing the development of the love affair, the part of the story mentioned above as belonging to the period between Books II and III, the subject-matter is foreshortened, summarized dramatically, producing as far as possible the impression of an immediate event.

It appeared thus that they might enjoy together extraordinary freedom, the two friends, from the moment they should understand their position aright. With the Prince himself, from an early stage, not unnaturally, Charlotte had made a

great point of their so understanding it; she had found frequent occasion to describe to him this necessity, and, her resignation tempered, or her intelligence at least quickened, by irrepressible irony, she applied at different times different names to the propriety of their case. The wonderful thing was that her sense of propriety had been from the first especially alive about it. There were hours when she spoke of their taking refuge in what she called the commonest tact—as if this principle alone would suffice to light their way; there were others when it might have seemed, to listen to her, that their course would demand of them the most anxious study and the most independent, not to say original, interpretation of signs. She talked now as if it were indicated at every turn by finger-posts of almost ridiculous prominence; she talked again as if it lurked in devious ways and were to be tracked through bush and briar; and she even on opportunity delivered herself in the sense that, as their situation was unprecedented, so their heaven was without stars. “‘Do’?” she once had echoed to him as the upshot of passages covertly, though briefly, occurring between them on her return. . . . “Isn’t the immense, the really quite matchless beauty of our position that we have to ‘do’ nothing in life at all?—nothing except the usual necessary everyday thing which consists in one’s not being more of a fool than one can help. . . . There has been plenty of ‘doing’, and there will doubtless be plenty still; but it’s all theirs, every inch of it; it’s all a matter of what they’ve done *to* us.” And she showed how the question had therefore been only of their taking everything as everything came, and all as quietly as might be. . . .

She was to remember not a little meanwhile the particular prolonged silent look with which the Prince had met her allusion to these primary efforts at escape.

This is the counterpart of the description of Maggie’s anxiety about the affair and is in the same way a fusion of past events, Charlotte’s and the Prince’s story, from an early stage, of many meetings and much talk, implying a long development and a lapse of months. Anyone who has the patience may look for these months in the time-scheme of the novel and satisfy himself that they are not there. But the essential thing is that this summary of the past is almost as lively as a scene, hardly less so than the actual scene between the lovers which it prepares for and leads up to; the two together, picture and scene, past and present, forming an uninterrupted action. The passage of preparation is not a narrative of events so much as a distillation of their meaning; it is unlocalized and undated, it contains sense without substance, the taste of life, character, passion and irony, like the Prince’s prolonged silent look. And within its suggestive brevity and self-dependence lurk overtones of meaning, of the irony and ambiguity which are distinctive notes of evil in James.

There is ‘picture’ of another kind, the prolonged moment of reflection, of which James says, writing of a passage in *The Portrait of a Lady*:

Reduced to its essence, it is but the vigil of searching criticism; but it throws the action further forward than twenty “incidents” might have done. It

was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. . . . It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as "interesting" as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate.

The vivacity of incident and the economy of picture. There is, for example, the fateful hour in *The Golden Bowl* when Mr. Verver anxiously ponders the effect that his marrying again may have on the exceptional relation between him and his daughter, and finds his characteristic answer when he realizes that by marrying he will appear to be deserting Maggie and so save her the pang of feeling that she has deserted *him*, separation being inevitable in any case.

Before such a question, as before several others when they recurred, he would come to a pause, leaning his arms on the old parapet and losing himself in a far excursion. . . . What he kept finding himself return to, disturbingly enough, was the reflection, deeper than anything else, that in forming a new and intimate tie he should in a manner abandon, or at the best signally relegate, his daughter. He should reduce to definite form the idea that he had lost her—as was indeed inevitable—by her own marriage. . . . As at a turn of his labyrinth he saw his issue, which opened out so wide, for the minute, that he held his breath with wonder. He was afterwards to recall how just then the autumn night seemed to clear to a view in which the whole place, everything round him, the wide terrace where he stood, the others, with their steps, below, the gardens, the park, the lake, the circling woods, lay there under some strange midnight sun. It all met him during these instants as a vast expanse of *discovery*, a world that looked, so lighted, extraordinarily new, and in which familiar objects had taken on a distinctness that, as if it had been a loud, a spoken pretension to beauty, interest, importance, to he scarce knew what, gave them an inordinate quantity of character and verily an inordinate size. The hallucination, or whatever he might have called it, was brief, but it lasted long enough to leave him gasping. . . . He had these several days groped and groped for an object that lay at his feet and as to which his blindness came from his stupidly looking beyond. It had sat all the while at his hearthstone, whence it now gazed up in his face.

Once he had recognized it there everything became coherent. The sharp point to which all his light converged was that the whole call of his future to him as a father would be in his so managing that Maggie would less and less appear to herself to have foresaken him.

Mr. Verver had reason to recall this hour. It is crucial to the story and is wonderfully set off by the weight and splendour of the passage. The moment is dramatic in an obvious sense; Mr. Verver is facing a crisis and looking for an issue; his motionlessly seeing is indeed 'action', which carries the story forward, and nothing like internal monologue, which is quite foreign to James's art. Yet he is careful to maintain the sense of a present event unfolding before the reader in moments like this, and adheres scrupulously to his point of view as in the phrase, 'he was afterwards to recall', and in all kinds of subtle gradation in the use of verbs. It is not only



because he wants to keep himself out of the story and so achieve a more convincing illusion, a greater authority than the mere 'thin guarantee' of a story-teller, but because he wants drama and has to mark out a direction of interest. 'All the letters', says Richardson of *Clarissa*, 'are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the event at the time generally dubious): so that they abound not only with critical situations but with what may be called *instantaneous descriptions*'. It is this liveliness of drama as well as its 'rounded objectivity' that James has always in view.

This is clear in the big scenes, where the reader's understanding is guided by the hero's or heroine's troubled appraisal of affairs. One drawback in this is that the protagonist's point of view may prevail too far and turn scene into picture, into a meditative vigil; and instead of the opposition of independent figures, more or less on a level to the spectator's eye, we may have largely the inner drama of a mind, the scene failing thus altogether of the rounded objectivity of a scene in a play. A good example of the way James deals with the problem is the great scene in *The Golden Bowl* where Charlotte confronts Maggie, on the terrace of the great country-house, outside the lighted room where the two husbands and their guests are quietly playing cards; the discarded and baffled mistress and the wife she has wronged. And while the latter's insight prevails, of course, and her perceptions, so rich and exact and moving, are the fine gloss on her crisis, yet the figure of the other woman is not 'compromised'; heightened by Maggie's fear it is indeed bigger than life. We do not see to the bottom of Charlotte, here or anywhere else in the novel, but that is because evil has always an air of mystery for James, as of something sealed and unapproachable; as it is cut off from sympathy so it resists a full comprehension. The scene illustrates very well a scheme of objectivity, of drama, with a maximum of sense, an art of the novel as single-minded and un-failing as Flaubert's.